

# Darlington Borough Council – Housing and Economic Land Availability Assessment (HELAA) Methodology

## March 2025

### Introduction

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) requires local authorities to prepare a Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA) to inform the preparation of the Local Plan. The purpose of the assessment is to identify land which is suitable, available and achievable for housing development over the lifetime of the Local Plan. The NPPF also requires that a review of land available for economic development is undertaken at the same time as or combined with the assessment of housing land.

Further guidance on undertaking combined assessments of housing and economic land, known as Housing and Economic Land Availability Assessments (HELAA), is set out in the national Planning Practice Guidance (PPG).

Darlington Borough Council is reviewing its Local Plan to cover development needs up to 2042. As the Council is undertaking a review of our existing plan the number of new sites requiring allocation, particularly for housing, is likely to be limited and primarily focused on small to medium developments and any potential brownfield development. As part of the evidence base for the review the Council will assess land for housing and economic development via the HELAA. Both housing and employment land can be submitted for consideration through the call for sites process.

This report sets out the proposed methodology for preparing the HELAA in Darlington. The methodology closely conforms with the national guidance in the PPG but provides a greater level of detail on how aspects of the assessment will be undertaken.

Representations from the HELAA Steering Group received on the methodology will be fully considered and any necessary amendments made. The methodology will also be made available on the Council's website [www.darlington.gov.uk](http://www.darlington.gov.uk)

It is intended that this document be a live document and will be updated by the Planning Policy Team over time if it becomes apparent that refinements are required or necessitated by changes to national policy.

The HELAA provides information on the potential for the development of sites and informs the preparation of the Local Plan. The assessment **does not allocate land**, this takes place through the Local Plan process and is subject to public consultation and an independent examination.

### HELAA Steering Group

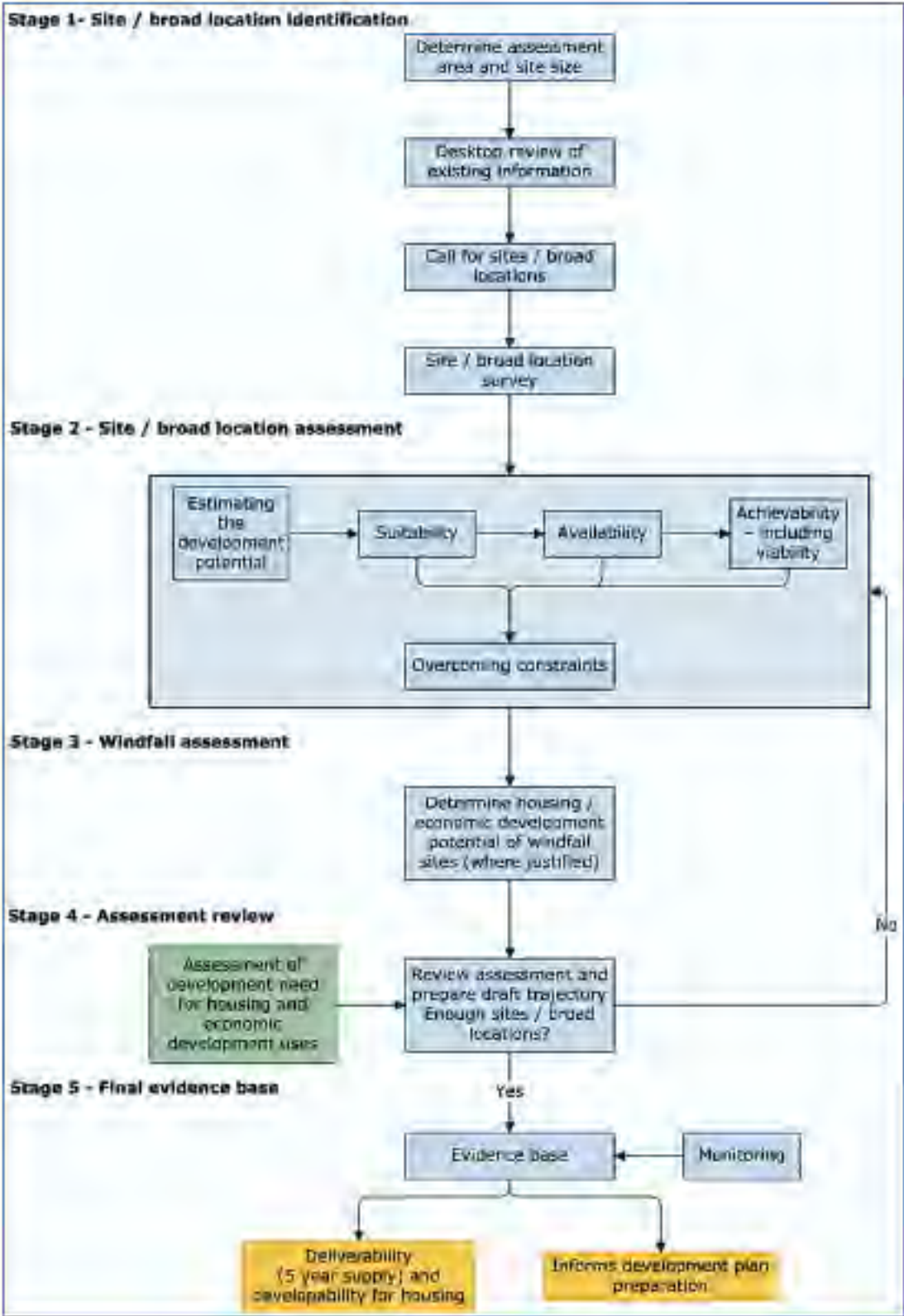
The purpose of the HELAA Steering Group is to ensure that the assessment is informed by the market knowledge and expertise of house builders, developers and agents in order to improve the report's findings with regard to whether sites would be likely to be developed if they were to be subsequently allocated. The Steering Group will consist of developers,

agents and registered providers who are on the Council's developer forum contact list and have an interest in Darlington.

The Steering Group will be consulted on the HELAA methodology and will also be given an opportunity to advise on an initial assessments of site yield, suitability, availability and achievability.

Methodology

The flowchart below, taken from the PPG, sets out the stages for undertaking the HELAA.



## **Stage 1: Identification of sites**

### **Assessment area**

The PPG advises that the assessment area for the HELAA should be the plan making area. For Darlington this is the borough boundary.

The PPG advises that the assessment should identify as wide a range of sites and broad locations for development as possible (including those existing sites that could be improved, intensified or changed). The assessment provides an audit of available land, regardless of the amount of development needed. As such, any land within Darlington Borough submitted to the Council for consideration will be assessed.

### **Partnership Working**

The PPG advises that it is important to involve a range of stakeholders in the assessment. This includes landowners and promoters, local property agents, developers, local communities, Local Enterprise Partnerships, businesses and their local representative organisations, parish and town councils and neighbourhood plan groups. These stakeholders will be notified of the call for sites process and will have an opportunity to comment on initial site assessments/a draft version of the HELAA.

### **Assessment size**

In accordance with the PPG the assessment will consider sites that can deliver five or more dwellings or economic development on sites of 0.25ha (or 500 sqm of floor space) and above.

### **Identification of sites**

The HELAA will seek to identify as wide a range of sites as possible in order to maximise potential choice of which sites could be allocated through the Local Plan process.

A desktop review of existing information will be undertaken by the Planning Policy Team to establish a list of sites to be assessed in the HELAA. The types of sites are set out below and the potential data sources set out in the PPG will be utilised.

- **Allocated sites**  
Allocated sites without planning permission.  
Sites identified in development briefs without planning permission
- **Planning applications**  
Planning permissions for housing and economic development that are unimplemented or under construction  
Refused/withdrawn planning applications  
Current/emerging planning applications without permission
- **Land in local authority ownership**
- **General desktop survey of mapping data**
- **Surplus and likely to become surplus public sector land**
- **Sites with permission in principle and identified brownfield land**
- **Vacant and derelict land and buildings**  
Empty homes, redundant/disused land and buildings, potential permitted development

- changes, e.g. offices to residential.
- **Redevelopment opportunities**  
Large scale redevelopment and redesign of existing residential or employment areas  
Smaller scale land with potential for redevelopment and/or more intensive use (e.g. car parks, under-used garage blocks)
- **Sites in adjoining villages and rural exceptions sites**
- **Potential urban extensions and new free-standing settlements**

### **Call for potential sites for development**

The call for sites provides an early opportunity for residents, developers and agents to put forward sites that they consider are appropriate for development. There will be an 8 week period for submitting sites.

The call for sites will welcome the submission of sites for all types of development. Housing sites should be able to deliver 5 dwellings and above. Economic development sites should be at least 0.25 ha or likely to accommodate a minimum of 500 m<sup>2</sup> of floor space. Any other uses submitted that do not fall within these two categories of land will be considered as part of the wider Local Plan review.

In order that the Council can accurately assess the development potential of sites it will require a range of information to be submitted from respondents, covering site location, ownership, potential use(s), the scale of development and any known constraints to development. The detail required is set out on the site submission form in Appendix A.

Existing Local Plan allocations and commitments will automatically be entered into the assessment.

### **Stage 2: Site Assessment**

A desktop review of the identified sites will be undertaken to establish potential constraints to development. All sites will be mapped and site information recorded in a database.

There are some sites where national policies and designations provide strong protection against development. These 'category 1 sites' listed below, will be excluded from further analysis in the HELAA as there is not a reasonable prospect that they could be developed. Where only part of a site falls within such designations, the affected part of the site will be excluded and the remainder of the site assessed for its development potential.

#### **Category 1 sites**

- Sites of Special Scientific Interest\*;
- RAMSAR sites\*;
- Special Protection Areas\*;
- Special Areas of Conservation\*;
- National Nature Reserves\*;
- Scheduled Ancient Monuments;
- Ancient Woodland;
- Health & Safety Executive Inner Zones;
- Flood Risk Area Zone 3b 'Functional Floodplain'.

*\* There are currently no designations of this type in Darlington BC.*

There are other types of land designation, Category 2 sites, where policy constraints may affect the scale and type of development possible. These provide an indication that the site has some constraints that would need to be addressed if it were to come forward for development. As constraints, such as green wedges and limits to development, may need to be relaxed over time in order to meet development needs it is appropriate to include sites in such locations in the HELAA.

#### Category 2 sites

- Allotments;
- Archaeological site;
- Conservation Area;
- Flood Risk Area Zones 2 'medium probability' and 3a 'high probability';
- Registered Historic Parks and Gardens;
- Health & Safety Executive Middle and Outer Zones;
- Listed Buildings
- Primary and Secondary Open Space;
- Green Wedge;
- Sites beyond the Limits to Urban Development;
- Local Wildlife Sites; and
- Local Nature Reserves

All sites other than Category 1 sites will be subject to a site survey to verify the information obtained in the desktop survey and to further assess their potential for development. The site survey will be undertaken from public vantage points only, such as from a public highway or right of way. At the site survey the following characteristics will be checked / recorded:

- site size, boundaries and location;
- current land use and character;
- land uses and character of surrounding area;
- physical constraints e.g. access, steep slopes, flooding, natural features of significance, location of infrastructure/utilities;
- potential environmental constraints;
- where relevant, development progress; and
- an initial assessment of whether the site has potential for residential/economic use taking a 'policy neutral' approach.

### **Estimating the development potential**

All surveyed sites will be assessed for their suitability, availability and achievability for development. An estimate of the potential yield of the site in terms of the number of dwellings and floorspace that sites could accommodate will also be undertaken.

#### **Site yield**

The PPG advises that estimation of development potential should be guided by existing or emerging plan policy including locally determined policies on density. It goes on to state that plan makers should seek to make the most efficient use of land in line with policies set out in the NPPF.

Where a site is allocated for an indicative number of dwellings in the Local Plan or a development brief, the number of dwellings indicated in those documents will be used for the site yield. Amendments to the yield will be made if the desktop assessment and site survey

reveal that a revised yield would be more appropriate, for example where a previously identified constraint has been resolved.

The indicative yield for sites with planning permission and/or pre application proposals where a developer has prepared a draft layout or yield will be included in the HELAA on the basis of the permitted number of units/pre-application proposals.

The Local Plan (2022) for Darlington does not set out density requirements that could be used to determine site yield. Relevant existing development schemes can be used as a basis for assessment, adjusted for any individual site characteristics and physical constraints. Therefore, where sites identified in the HELAA are not allocated sites, do not have planning permission, and do not have a draft scheme the yield will be assessed through comparison to other sites of a similar scale in the locality which have planning permission and or where recent development has occurred within the locality.

Where there are no sites of similar scale and character in the locality to compare the assessment site with, a density multiplier approach will be applied. Firstly, a net developable area will be calculated using the ranges set out below based on evidence from Tapping the Potential: Best Practice in Assessing Urban Housing Capacity (URBED, 1999).

These figures will be used as a guide but will not be applied rigidly. There may, for example, be sites over 0.4 ha where over 90% is developable, for example where no public open space is required on site because there is already sufficient provision in the local area. A cautious approach will also be taken in applying the net developable area percentages given recent requirements around biodiversity net gain and nutrient neutrality.

Site size	Net developable area
Under 0.4ha	100% developable
0.4ha to 2ha	75 - 90 % developable
Over 2ha	50 - 75 % developable

The number of dwellings that could potentially be accommodated on the sites will be calculated by multiplying the net developable area by the following typical housing densities. Exceptions may be made having regard to local circumstances, for example, where a site is likely to be for larger homes, lower densities can be used. Alternatively, if an apartment block is proposed on a site a significantly higher density will be used.

Location	Density
Within town centre and urban limits	35 dwellings per hectare
Beyond the urban limits to development	35 dwellings per hectare

These density multipliers were agreed by the steering group for the 2017 HELAA and are considered to remain appropriate for use.

### **Suitability of site for development**

A site or broad location can be considered suitable if it would provide an appropriate location for development when considered against relevant constraints and their potential to be mitigated. The Planning Policy Team will assess the suitability of the identified sites for a range of uses. If the land is identified as being suitable for housing different house types will

be considered (e.g. market, private rented, affordable, self-build, older persons housing, and students). The type of housing identified is purely indicative.

Allocated sites and sites with planning permission will be considered suitable for development unless there has been a material change in circumstances. The suitability of allocated sites for uses other than those identified for housing in the Local Plan will also be considered. (e.g. some employment allocations may be suitable for housing).

The following factors will be considered when assessing suitability for development:

- physical limitations such as access, infrastructure, ground conditions, flood risk; hazardous risks, pollution and contamination;
- potential impacts upon landscape features, nature and heritage conservation;
- appropriateness and likely market attractiveness for the type of development proposed;
- contribution to regeneration priority areas;
- environmental/amenity impacts on future occupiers and neighbouring areas.

Where a site currently has a designation such as green wedge, rural gap or located beyond development limits but considered suitable for development in other respects the site will be identified as suitable in the HELAA. This is to ensure that the Local Plan review considers all potential sources of land supply. This 'policy neutral' approach is also in recognition that Darlington is constrained geographically, and that in order to meet the Borough's housing and economic development needs some of the above policy constraints may need to be relaxed over time.

### **Availability of site for development**

A site is considered to be available for development, when on the best information available, there is confidence that there are no legal or ownership problems (for example, unresolved multiple ownerships, ransom strips, and long tenancies).

Where a developer has expressed an intention to develop or a landowner an intention to sell, for example by submitting their land for assessment, it will be assumed that the site is available. Exceptions will be made where a developer has a persistent record of non-delivery and/or a landowner is known to be seeking an unrealistic land value.

Where sites have been put forward by third parties, such as residents, the site will only be considered available if accurate ownership information can be established and the owner indicates a willingness to release the land for development.

### **Achievability of site for development – including viability**

A site is considered to be achievable for development where there is a reasonable prospect that the type of development identified will be developed on the site at a particular point in time. This is essentially a judgement about the economic viability of a site and whether it is likely to be developed within the next 15 years. The input from members of the HELAA Steering Group will also provide a check on which sites are viable for development.

### *Assessment of timescale and rate of development*

The assessment of suitability, availability, achievability and constraints will be used to estimate the timescale within which each site is capable of development. The assessment divides sites



between deliverable within five years and developable within 6-10 years, 11-15 years and beyond.

The NPPF requires that in order to be considered deliverable within five years: “sites for housing should be available now, offer a suitable location for development now, and be achievable with a realistic prospect that housing will be delivered on the site within five years. In particular:

- a) sites which do not involve major development and have planning permission, and all sites with detailed planning permission, should be considered deliverable until permission expires, unless there is clear evidence that homes will not be delivered within five years (for example because they are no longer viable, there is no longer a demand for the type of units or sites have long term phasing plans).
- b) where a site has outline planning permission for major development, has been allocated in a development plan, has a grant of permission in principle, or is identified on a brownfield register, it should only be considered deliverable where there is clear evidence that housing completions will begin on site within five years.”

When classifying sites as deliverable within the assessment, officers will ensure the above definition is met and guidance will be utilised within the PPG when ensuring that there is appropriate evidence to demonstrate deliverability.

House building rates and timing of housing completions on individual sites will be projected using the assumptions set out below:

- where sites are under construction utilise average build rates from previous years;
- where sites are yet to commence development utilise average completion rates between 25-35 dwellings per annum (single open market site and single volume builder);
- where apartments are involved increases the above rates to 35-50 per annum;
- rates can be reduced on larger, executive style schemes where delivery can be slower and demand lower;
- for large sites with two builders it is reasonable to double the output;
- standard timescales for obtaining full planning permission and to begin construction on site (allowance of 2 years or 1 year where outlined permission already secured); and,
- information on build rates and/or timing supplied by the developer or their agent.

The assumptions will be used as a general guide but will not be applied rigidly where other information is available that suggest the rates and timing should be amended.

### **Stage 3: Windfall Assessment (housing)**

The HELAA does not assess sites of under 5 dwellings. It is, therefore, appropriate to include a windfall allowance for these smaller sites. The current Local Plan housing trajectory includes a windfall allowance of sites below 10 dwellings. The intention is to continue with this approach. The level of the allowance will be based on the annual average number of windfall sites of fewer than 10 dwellings that have come forward over previous years.

#### **Stage 4: Assessment Review**

The development potential of all assessed sites plus the small sites windfall allowance will be collated to produce an indicative trajectory of the amount of housing development that could be realistically provided grouped into five year time frames. The quantity of suitable land available for economic development will also be summarised.

At this stage, ideally, more sites will have been identified than required to meet development needs. If, however, insufficient sites have been identified to meet development needs the assessment will be revisited. This could involve a further call for sites or changing assumptions about the development potential of particular sites to ensure they make the most efficient use of land. This may include applying a range of densities for example in the town centre or other locations that are well served by public transport.

#### **Stage 5: Final Evidence Base**

##### **Core Outputs**

Once the call for sites, site assessments and assessment review has been completed a final report will be published on the Council's website.

The report will contain:

- a list of all sites considered, cross referenced to location maps;
- an assessment of each site's suitability, availability and achievability;
- the potential type and quantity of development, including an estimate of build out rates, setting out how any barriers to delivery could be overcome and when;
- an indicative trajectory of anticipated development based on the evidence available.

# Appendix A

## Call for Sites Site Submission Form

### Section 1: Your contact details

Name	
Organisation (if applicable)	
Address	
E-mail	
Telephone	

Please specify if you are the:

Land owner	
Agent	
Developer	
Other (please specify)	

### Section 2: Site details

Site name	
Site address	
Grid Reference (if known)	
Easting Northing	
Site area (ha)	
Current use of site	
If the site is vacant what was the last known use	
Type of land: greenfield / brownfield	

Please provide a red edged location plan of the site. Submissions can only be accepted where a map showing the boundaries of the site is provided. Please provide shape files if they are available. Has a map been attached:

Yes	
No	

Please provide below details of known relevant planning history and/or pre application discussions that have taken place with the Council (including reference numbers).

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### Section 3: Site ownership details

Name and address of owner(s) of land if different from section 1

Name	
Organisation (if applicable)	
Address	
E-mail	
Telephone	

If you are not the owner, is the owner(s) aware of and supportive of the submission?

Yes	
No	

Is the site in single ownership or multiple ownership?

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Does land ownership present any constraints which could delay the sites' development (e.g. ransom strips)?

--

Is the site subject to any other land interests, such as tenancies, which could delay the site's development?

--

Is the site available for development now?

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### Section 4: Proposed Uses of the Site

Which of the types of development listed below are you proposing the site for? (please tick all that apply)

<b>Housing</b>	
Houses	
Apartments	
Custom/self-build housing	
Older people housing	
Residential institution	
Student accommodation	
<b>Economic</b>	
Office	
General industrial	
Storage and distribution / warehousing	
Retail	

Leisure	
Cultural	
<b>Other – please specify</b>	

### Section 5: Proposed level of development

Please provide details of the scale of development that you consider the site could accommodate in relation to the uses you have ticked in section 4 (e.g. number of homes, number of beds in residential institution, floorspace m<sup>2</sup>).

### Section 6: Site constraints

Does the site contain any constraints or designations which would prevent or limit development (e.g. flood zone 2 or 3, listed building, local wildlife site, HSE zone)?

### Section 7: Potential timescale for development

Are you aware of any viability issues or challenges related to the site?

Bearing in mind any constraints to development when do you consider development could realistically be delivered on the site?

Within 5 years	6 -10 years	11-15years	15+ years

## **Section 8: Supporting documentation**

Please attached any supporting documentation for your submission.

Completed site submission forms can be returned:

- by email to: [planning.policy@darlington.gov.uk](mailto:planning.policy@darlington.gov.uk)
- by post to:

Planning Policy Team  
Town Hall  
Darlington  
DL1 5QT

Further information on the HELAA can be obtained by phone: 01325 406724